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ABSTRACT

Test-taking skills and methods used to prepare students for taking an examination are independent of knowledge and skills in the content area being tested. Test-taking skills do not give students the correct answers, but do allow the student to concentrate on answering questions without being confused by the mechanics of the test. Students who lack test-taking skills should be identified, and helped to become test wise, through ethically and educationally sound techniques. Tests should be fair and appropriate and should be scored in a proper manner. Teaching test-taking skills is not a quick remedy for poor instruction and insufficient learning, but it can help the student in learning, interpersonal relationships, work activities, and other situations they will encounter throughout life. A list of 24 resources on preparing students for testing, an ERIC digest on test-taking skills, and a Department of Education publication on test taking are attached. (Contains 28 references.) (SLD)

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1993

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Preparing Students for Testing: Should We Promote Test Wiseness?

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"Test no students before their time." - Gene Sharratt

When students take a test, it is important that their score be accurate and reliable estimates of the knowledge and skills they possess. Thorndike (1951) points out that test wiseness is a source of error in test scores and can affect test validity.

> . . . performance on many types of tests is likely to be in some measure a function of the individual's ability to understand what he is supposed to do on the test. Particularly as the test situation is novel or the instructions complex, this factor is likely to enter in. At the same time, [the] test score is likely to be in some measure a function of the extent to which the individual is at home with tests and has a certain amount of sagacity with regard to tricks of taking them. Freedom from emotional tension, shrewdness with regard to when to guess, and a keen eye for secondary and extraneous cues are likely to be useful in a wide range of tests, particularly those which are not well constructed. The presence of variance in score due to variation in comprehension of instructions and in test-wiseness is usually undesirable from the point of view of the purposes of the test in question. It usually represents systematic invalid variance serving systematically to reduce the validity of the test. (p. 569)

Kilian (1992) says, "a test score can underrepresent what a student knows because the student is confused by the format, terminology, or the way in which questions are asked" (p. 14). Berliner (1986) notes, "When a person scores low on achievement tests, it could mean that the person possesses a low level of subject-matter knowledge, or it could mean that the person has a low level of test-wiseness. We need to be able to disentangle these two characteristics in order to evaluate our students and our instruction." Prell and Prell (1986) add that "as test-wiseness techniques are taught to students, a more accurate reflection or estimation of students' actual knowledge will increase and be improved" (p. 4).

What Is Test Wiseness?

English and English (1958) define a test-wise person as one who is "experienced in taking tests; knowing how to increase one's scores by evasion of some of the standard requirements" (p. 550). Millman, Bishop, and Eble, in their landmark article that provides a theoretical framework for the concept of test wiseness, define it as: "a subject's capacity to utilize the characteristics and formats of the test and/or the test taking situation to receive a high score. Test-wiseness is logically independent of the examinee's knowledge of the subject matter for which the items are supposedly measures." (1965, p. 707)

Elsewhere, we have defined test wiseness as "the use of test-taking skills that will enhance test performance so that the test provides a better estimate of what an individual knows and is able to do" (Wheeler and Haertel, 1993, p. 146). Experience alone is not enough, especially if it is misdirected, inappropriate, or unrelated. Test wiseness is not cheating; no effort is made to evade standard requirements. It does not guarantee a high

score. But it can mean a higher score, one less affected by extraneous factors and thus a more reliable estimate of an individual's level of performance. Despite a high level of test wiseness, a student might still score low on a test if his/her performance level on the attribute being tested is low.

Millman, Bishop, and Eble (1965, pp. 711-712) identify two major types of test wiseness: (1) those independent of the test constructor or the test purpose, and (2) those dependent upon the test constructor or the test purpose. Examples of test-wiseness strategies associated with the first type are: time use, error avoidance, guessing, and deductive reasoning. Examples of strategies associated with the second type are intent consideration (i.e., knowing what the test developer is looking for) and cue use (i.e., recognizing and using information in other items or consistent idiosyncrasies).

Should We Promote Test Wiseness?

Some educators feel it is unfair to prepare students for tests and other performance assessments. However, we feel it is unfair not to prepare them. This is especially true for lower achieving students, as many higher achieving students regularly participate in activities that better prepare them for assessments. High achieving students are often highly motivated to do well on tests and may have less test anxiety, based on successful experiences in the past on tests. It is not only fair to prepare lower achieving students for test taking; it also increases the statistical reliability and validity of the assessment by reducing a significant confounder.

Research indicates that teaching test-taking skills and promoting test wiseness are associated with higher levels of performance on the test (see, for example, Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, and Kulik, 1983; Dreisbach and Keogh, 1982; Kalechstein, Kalechstein, and Doctor, 1981; Samson, 1985; Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1988; Wahlston and Boersma, 1968). Based on his review of the literature on test wiseness, Sarnacki (1979) concludes that we should identify all persons who lack test-taking skills so they can overcome their handicap and so we can reduce the error effects of test wiseness on test scores.

Test preparation activities by educators can range from doing nothing to providing students with copies of the tests and/or answers. The first is irresponsible; the second is unethical. But we have many options between these extremes. "Properly done, test wiseness is a legitimate part of instruction" (Hall and Kleine, 1991, p. 2).

Mehrens and Kaminski (1989) identify seven levels of assistance to prepare students for standardized achievement tests. These are (Mehrens, 1989, p. 1):

1. giving general instruction on district objectives without referring to the objectives that the standardized tests measure;

2. teaching test-taking skills;

3. providing instruction on objectives where objectives may have been determined by looking at the objectives that a variety of standardized tests measure (The objectives taught may or may not contain objectives on teaching test-taking skills.);

4. providing instruction based on objectives (skills and subskills) that specifically match those on the standardized test to be administered;

5. providing instruction on specifically matched objectives (skills and subskills) where the practice or instruction follows the same format as the test questions;

6. providing practice or instruction on a published parallel form of the same test; and

7. providing practice or instruction on the test itself.

Mehrens and Kaminski point out that the last two are never ethical, but regard the first and second ones as ethical. There could be debate about whether three through five are ethical or not. However, we feel there is an issue of fairness here. If students are going to be compared to other students, as is frequently the case with tests, then all must receive not only the opportunities to learn the content and skills being tested, but also the experiences that will allow them to develop similar test-taking skills and levels of test wiseness.

Popham (1989, p. 13) offers two evaluative standards for educators to consider when preparing students for testing:

> Professional Ethics: No test-preparation practice should violate the ethical standards of the education profession.
>
> Educational Defensibility: No test-preparation practice should increase the students' test scores without simultaneously increasing student mastery of the content domain tested.

He applies these two standards to five test preparation practices: (1) previous-form preparation, (2) current-form preparation, (3) generalized test-taking preparation, (4) same-format preparation, and (5) varied-format preparation. He concludes that only the third and fifth ones meet both his evaluative standards.

Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas (1991, p. 4) present a continuum of test preparation activities:

> Training in testwiseness skills
>
> Checking answer sheets to make sure that each has been properly completed
>
> Increasing student motivation to perform on the test through appeals to parents, students, and teachers
>
> Developing a curriculum based on the content of the test
>
> Preparing objectives based on items on the test and teaching accordingly
>
> Presenting items similar to those on the test
>
> Using *Scoring High* or other score-boosting activities
>
> Dismissing low-achieving students on testing day to artificially boost test scores
>
> Presenting items verbatim from the test to be given

They consider the first three to be ethical, the next four to be unethical, and the last two to be highly unethical. The second one, checking answer sheets, should be done in a manner that will not change the student's score; for example, this should not include filling in correct responses for the student's omitted answers, darkening the correct answer when two have been marked and it is not clear which answer was intended by the student, adding a label to a graph, or correcting grammatical errors in a writing sample.

When comparing performance of students to a norming sample, must one keep in mind the fact that the students who participated in the norming sample may not have had an opportunity to become familiar with the format of the test, or to learn all the content and skills covered, or to become highly motivated to do well. Such factors might be partially offset by a lower level of test anxiety. However, this issue should be considered when using national norms. Kilian (1992) says, "The appropriateness of test-preparation activities for nationally standardized tests should be based upon activities and information available to students and teachers involved in the norming of the test" (p. 15). Normally such individuals have very little or no information about a test, whereas once a test is on the market or part of a testing program, descriptive materials and practice items are often available from the publisher. This may contribute to the phenomenon known as the Lake Wobegon effect (Cannell, 1987).

How to Help Students Become Test-Wise?

Extraneous factors can influence a student's score and result in a lower estimate of his/her level of performance than warranted. Some of these extraneous factors include: low exposure to the knowledge and skills covered by the test, a lack of familiarity with the mechanics of taking tests, a lack of awareness of the purpose of the testing, a high level of anxiety, and a lack of understanding of how to estimate an answer or willingness to make intelligent guesses. This paper discusses these and other factors, and identifies ways that educators and parents can help students develop their test-taking skills. The goal of such a test preparation program is for students to develop a set of skills and attitudes that enable them to understand the characteristics of the test, the process of taking tests, and the nature of the testing context. This will provide a better estimate of each student's level of performance on the attributes being tested.

Green and Stewart (1985) point out, "From an educational point of view, the basic concern with testing should be to ensure that all testees enter a test-taking situation adequately prepared and cognizant of the appropriate test-taking skills to enable them to decode a test to the best of their ability. This, then, becomes the challenge that educators must face." (p. 43)

Exposure to Content and Skills Assessed

A first step in preparing students for assessments is exposure to the content and skills covered by the test. Such exposure may consist of direct instruction, special projects, or outside assignments (e.g., reading lists, television viewing, field trips). For example, a test on earth science to be given to all students at a certain grade level may cover the following topics: History of the Planet Earth, the Earth's Surface, the Earth's Crust, the Earth's Core, Gravity, Magnetism, Solar System, Soils/Rocks/Mineral, Mass Movement, Meteorology, Atmosphere, and Environmentalism. However, if the students have not been taught or exposed to all of these topics, it is an unfair situation and an invalid assessment for these students. Either students should be exposed to the additional topics (as long as they fit within the curricular framework, and time and resources are available) or another test should be selected or developed that more closely matches what the students have been taught.

As part of test preparation, the teacher might plan on reviewing the content and skills that will be on the test; but reviewing on a regular basis should be part of any instructional program. Regular review promotes retention and increases competence. Reviewing

should not be an activity done solely for the purpose of preparing students for a test; cramming is not an effective way to increase student performance on a long-term basis and can result in a fatigued test-taker.

We do not encourage "teaching to the test," that is, determining what is to be taught based on what will be tested. Instead, assessments should be selected or developed that closely match the scope, depth, and difficulty of the content and skills being taught.

Awareness of the Purposes of the Testing

Individuals perform best when they understand the purpose of what they are doing or why it is important for them to do their best on a job. If students are aware of the importance of the test, both for themselves and for their school, they are more likely to perform well on the examination. Making students aware of the purposes of the testing should improve both their attitude toward the testing and their motivation.

Parents, teachers, and staff should also be aware of the purposes of the testing. They can provide much encouragement to the students and provide a good testing environment prior to and on the day of the examination.

Mechanics of Taking Tests

After years of taking tests, the mechanics might come quite naturally to older students, just as measuring ingredients does to experienced chefs, but younger students and persons new to test-taking need to learn the mechanics involved.

When taking a test, there are several factors to consider: the format of the test, the various materials involved, the layout or organization of the test book, timing and pacing of test sections, how to follow directions, different types of items, different administrative procedures, and different response formats. One approach to teaching students about the mechanics of tests utilizes assignments, quizzes, and teacher-made tests at school. Teachers can use a format similar to those on a test (e.g., a three-paragraph reading passage with four multiple-choice questions below it, as one might see on a standardized multiple-choice test), or a procedure similar to those used with alternative assessments (e.g., group problem solving, listing reasons for an answer). In addition, teachers can also number the questions and answers, number the pages, and use symbols such as arrows for "Turn to the next page," and bars on the right edge or large numbers in the upper corners of each page to indicate test section. Use of instructions, such as "Check your work in this section only" or "Put your pencil down and look up at me" familiarize students with typical standardized test directions.

Whenever students are given a task to do, encourage them to make a list of the materials they will need and have them check to see if they have all the materials (e.g., for a math quiz: calculator, ruler, two pencils, eraser, two sheets of scrap paper, one sheet of ruled paper for writing answers). Be sure they know how to properly use the materials and that they know how to erase or change a response so that their intended response will be clear when being scored.

In addition to materials, also make students familiar with the type of information they may have to provide when taking a test (e.g., full name, date of birth, gender, grade level, school code, student identification number). It helps to have students practice writing and gridding their identification information on blank answer sheets.

Give students directions, both oral and written, that they must clearly understand in order to do their assignments correctly. When scoring tests and grading assignments, note the types of errors that the students are making, not only in the areas being tested, but also with the mechanics of the testing. Discuss individually and in groups the types of mistakes students made because they did not follow directions carefully.

Whenever using separate answer sheets, students must be careful to fill in the bubbles for corresponding questions. Give them a practice test where numbers might be skipped in the test book, but not on the answer sheet, to be sure they are marking next to the correct number. For example, some tests may have 25 items in a section for one level and 30 items in that section for another level, yet both levels use the same answer sheet. Be sure students understand that they should not continue marking the items for the next section in the spaces for items 26-30, but instead should leave those blank. Also, if students are only taking certain sections of the test and yet the answer sheet has parts for all sections, be sure students know to mark their answers in the appropriate part of the answer sheet for that section of the test.

Give the students timed activities during class so they can learn how to pace themselves and complete the task before time is called. Work with them to practice budgeting their time and monitoring their use of time when doing various tasks, not just when taking tests. Encourage them to skip difficult items and come back to them as time permits. Provide strategies for them to try, such as reading the questions first and then the narrative stimulus materials on a reading comprehension test. Be sure they understand the difference between a power test (one that provides enough time for most students to finish) and a speeded test (one designed to see how much a test-taker can complete within a given time period and that most students will not be able to finish).

Use a variety of types of items on your quizzes and tests – multiple-choice, true-false, matching, ranking, labeling, fill-in-the-blanks, short answer, drawings, essays – including the type(s) of items that will be used on the end-of-course exams and standardized tests. Also use different formats for recording answers. Examples of such formats are: mark an X through the wrong answers; put a check mark in front of the right answer; circle the next number; cross out the picture; fill in the bubble on a separate answer sheet; fill in the bubble below the picture; underline the errors; and write the answer on the line below the question.

Younger students who have been responding in the test booklet or orally need to be introduced to the use of separate answer sheets prior to taking such tests (Wise, Duncan, and Plake, 1985). Whenever a student is filling in an answer sheet or form that will be machine-read, it is important that the sheet be clean and complete. Show students how to quickly check their answer sheets for smudges, poor erasures, multiple answers to questions, and questions they skipped or didn't answer.

Guessing, Estimating, and Risk-Taking

Many students are reluctant to guess on tests because of the penalties. On most tests, even with scoring procedures that correct for guessing, students are better off making guesses. In many cases, students are able to make at least minimally-informed guesses, rather than making wild guesses or randomly marking their answers. They should only change their first answer if they are certain it is incorrect, if they have given further deliberation to the item, or if they have obtained additional information from later items

in the test (Mueller and Wasser, 1977). Green (1981) reports that test takers with a high level of test anxiety are more apt to change their answers than low-anxious students.

Through their instructional activities, teachers should teach skills that will enable students to make more informed guesses and better estimates of correct answers. These skills include: comparing, analyzing, estimating, evaluating, eliminating, substituting, checking, and skimming. Instructional activities that promote advanced thinking skills can improve students' performance on tests. It is important that students learn when and how to take calculated risks in testing situations.

Test Anxiety and Self-Confidence

If students lack self-confidence or are very anxious about a test, their performance on the test can suffer. "When tests are used at crucial decision-making points for students, the associated stress may be sufficient to interfere with performances that might have been anticipated in nonstressful conditions" (Naylor, 1990, p. 125).

Prior to the testing, encourage students to talk in class about how they feel about the testing and how they think they will do on the tests. Move students from making negative statements about themselves and the testing to making positive statements (e.g., "I never can finish in time" to "I know how to pace myself so I can complete all the test items"). Irwin (1985) identifies several means for helping high school students cope with test anxiety, from reassurance and social support to modeling and self-monitoring.

Students must learn to not panic when they encounter a difficult item, but instead to make a quick guess, or to skip it and move on. If students are uncertain about the directions or procedures, they should be encouraged to ask questions of the test administrator rather than sit and wonder if they are following procedures correctly. Of course the test administrator can provide no information concerning which response is correct. Students should confront the testing with a "can-do" attitude. They need to feel good about themselves and believe that the assessment is providing them with a fair chance to show what they know and are able to do. Set reasonable expectations for each student's performance. Use functional-level testing (i.e., use a level of the test that is appropriate for what each individual student can do rather than the level designed for students of his/her age or grade level).

Help students learn how to concentrate on the task at hand. Show students how to use relaxation and deep breathing techniques. These techniques will help reduce the level of test anxiety and improve self-confidence.

"In so far as anxiety acts to distort test performance it can be rightly regarded as a source of measurement error that affects both the reliability and validity of tests" (Naylor, 1990, p. 125). This is an area that should not be overlooked in a test-taking skills program for improving students' test wiseness.

Support from Home

Students can receive support from home that will enable them to do better on tests. Criscuolo (1986) says, "Teachers and administrators must work with parents in their districts to ensure adequate preparation for taking tests" (p. 331). This should be part of any program designed to increase students' test wiseness.

One important role for the home is to have the student in good physical shape for the testing. This includes being well rested. The night before the examination the student should eat a nutritious meal, do some relaxing activities, avoid arguments or upsetting situations, and get a good night's sleep. The next morning before school the student should eat a good breakfast, dress in comfortable clothes, and get to school early. If the student needs special items (e.g., eyeglasses), it is important to be sure that he/she has them.

Support from home can also help get the student in good mental shape. Family members should be encouraging and reassuring. They should exhibit a positive attitude toward the testing and indicate its importance. They should help the child feel good about him/herself, and express an interest in how he/she does on the test.

Summary

- The test-taking skills and methods used to prepare students for taking an examination are independent of student knowledge and skills in the content area being tested. Test-taking skills do not give students the correct answers, but being familiar with testing formats and procedures allows students to concentrate on answering questions and not be confused by the mechanics of the exam or other extraneous factors.

- We should identify those students who lack sufficient test-taking skills and help them become test-wise, using ethical and educationally sound techniques that are in accordance with the guidelines of the test publisher and of the professional testing associations.

- The test should cover what the students have been taught, should reflect the goals and objectives of the program, should be at an appropriate level of difficulty for each student (i.e., at each student's functional level), and should be administered and scored in a proper manner.

- Teaching students test-taking skills and helping them become test-wise test-takers is not a quick remedy for poor instruction and insufficient learning, or for a weak educational program. The best way to prepare students for testing is to provide them with a solid educational program that challenges them, but in which they are able to succeed.

- Test-taking skills go beyond performance on tests and assessments. Skills such as pacing, estimating, following directions, intelligent guessing, problem solving, and risk-taking can help the students in school learning, interpersonal relationships, work activities, and many other situations they will encounter throughout life.

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Resources on How to Prepare Students for Testing

The following publications have been designed to prepare students for taking tests. Some are directed at specific age levels (e.g., primary school, college entrance), whereas others are more general. Books directed toward a specific test or assessment program are not included below; however, many of these books contain sections with general test wiseness information and may be helpful. We recommend obtaining up-to-date sample items and assessment materials directly from the test publisher for a specific assessment program or test, rather than relying on what is provided in so-called "coaching books." Such books may be misleading in terms of the types of test items and assessment tasks, or may not be current. The inclusion of a publication on this list should not be taken as a recommendation for its use for you and your students. You should review such materials carefully prior to using them. We also suggest that you check with your librarian for additional materials on this topic.

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Improving your test-taking skills

by Ronald T.C. Boyd

If you are a high school student, taking tests is a fact of life. If you do well on tests, more opportunities will be open to you. Even after you are out of school, you may still have to take tests to get certain jobs. So whether you are taking a college entrance exam or a test written by your teacher, you need to have good test-taking skills. You can use several techniques both before and during a test to make sure that your test scores reflect what you really know.

What can you do before the test?

The best way to get ready for a test is to study from the beginning of the course. It's smart to prepare a little bit each day. Preparing for a test gradually lets you absorb the material, make connections between concepts, and draw conclusions. Studying each subject every night will save you the agony of having to cram on the night before a test.

There is no mystery to doing well on a test. Since most teachers create tests that are based on the reading assignments and on the material that they cover in class, you should read your assignments, listen to your teacher, and take good notes about what your teacher thinks is important. When you prepare to take a test, try these ideas:

- **Create your own study aids.** Aids such as flashcards, checklists, chapter outlines, and summaries will help you organize and remember the material better. You might think that it takes a lot of time to make these aids, but they will help you condense the test material into a manageable size.

- **Organize a study group.** Ask other students to arrange a time for a group to study together several nights before the day of the test. If you study with a group, you can combine everyone's resources. By comparing notes, you can sometimes determine what may appear on the test. A word of caution about study groups -- don't let them become social events. You could waste valuable time. Instead, throw a party after the test to celebrate your success.

- **Arrive early on the test day.** Rushing to a test or arriving late can destroy your concentration. Don't try to cram in some last minute studying or answer questions from other members of your class. Tactics like this are generally counterproductive and tend to confuse you.

What can you do during the test?

In addition to studying before the test, you should also be prepared when you come to take a test. Here are some general pointers that you can follow for any type of test:

- **Bring all the supplies you need.** Be prepared for taking a test by bringing paper, pencils, and pens with you. Don't depend on someone else to give these supplies to you.

- **Read and listen to all directions carefully before starting the test.** One of the most important test-taking skills is the ability to follow directions. Some students are so anxious to get the test over with that they skip the directions; this is often a costly mistake.

- **Budget your time.** Be sure to allow enough time to answer all parts of the test, not just the hard parts or the parts you know best. Some teachers may include a note about how much time you should spend on each section. Use these notes as guidelines to check yourself so that you don't spend too much time on one section.

- **Make a special effort to write neatly.** Although neatness may not officially count toward your overall grade, a teacher who is faced with a mountain of papers to grade will appreciate a clearly written test because it is easier to grade. Consciously or unconsciously, neatness has a positive effect on your teacher.

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- **If the test includes both essay and multiple-choice questions, fill out the multiple-choice part first.** Answering multiple-choice questions will help you remember the material and make connections between concepts. Multiple-choice questions may also contain information that you can use to answer essay questions.

- **If you have extra time, check your answers.** If you finish a test before your time is up, don't hand in your test. Use the extra time to check over your answers. Do not frustrate yourself, however, by concentrating on questions that you simply don't know how to answer.

How to take a multiple-choice exam

Multiple-choice exams usually require that you choose from three or four possible answers. Here are some strategies for succeeding on multiple-choice tests:

- **Make educated guesses.** Before you start, ask your teacher how the test is scored. If there is no penalty for guessing, answer every question, even if you have to guess. If you are penalized for guessing, blind guessing will probably hurt your score. If you can eliminate one or two of the choices, then guessing will be more profitable.

- **Don't get stuck on any of the questions.** Work through multiple-choice tests quickly and carefully. Don't get bogged down on a question that you can't answer or are unsure about. Make a small mark beside the question, and if you have the time, return to it later.

- **Fill in answers on standardized tests carefully.** Many standardized tests have separate answer sheets. Make sure that the number you are answering corresponds to the number of the question. If you skip a question, be sure to leave the space for that question blank. Make sure you fill in the blanks completely so that the machine that grades the test can easily record your answer.

How to take an essay test

Essay questions frequently appear on tests, especially for subjects that are not scientific or mathematical. Essay tests usually require you to pull information together, make relationships, and draw conclusions. On the whole, essay tests usually take more time than objective exams. Try to use your time wisely. Keep these guidelines in mind when you have to write an essay test:

- **Read all of the questions on the test before answering any of them.** The questions often contain valuable information that may be helpful when you write your answer. Reading all of the questions before starting will help refresh your memory about the material and will help you make an informed choice if you have to choose from several questions.

- **Underline key verbs in the question.** Essay questions usually focus on one or more key verbs. Here are some key words that often appear on essay exams:
  compare -- examine similarities and differences
  summarize -- briefly give the major points
  discuss -- examine or analyze in detail
  relate -- emphasize connections and associations
  Concentrate on these key verbs; they will give you clues to the type of information that your teacher wants to see in your essay.

- **Make a brief outline before you start writing.** Good organization is important in an essay exam. Take a few minutes in the beginning to collect your thoughts and write a brief outline for your answer. Essays often involve discussing certain key points. Identify these points and put them in your outline. If you run out of time and don't explain all of the points on your outline, write down the points in your outline and add a note saying that you ran out of time. You may get partial credit for your effort.

Taking a test doesn't have to be a dreadful experience. Practicing your test-taking skills will help you manage the anxiety that often accompanies tests. Good test-taking skills will not guarantee that you will get an "A" on every test, but they will ensure that your test score reflects what you really know.

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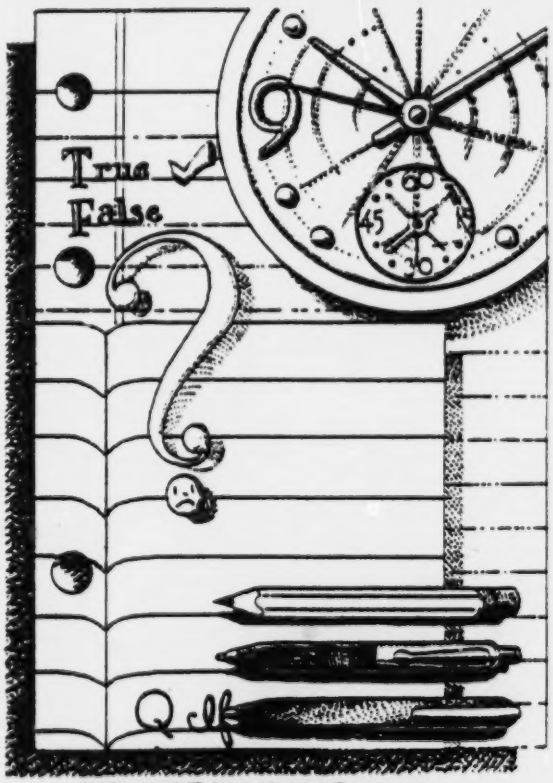
Help Your Child Improve In Test-Taking



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U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20208

"American children must be ready to learn from the first day of school. And of course, preparing children for school is a historic responsibility of parents."

President George Bush

TEST. It's a loaded word. Important. . . something to care about. . . something that can mean so much we get apprehensive thinking about it.

Tests are important, especially to schoolchildren. A test may measure a basic skill. It can affect a year's grade. Or, if it measures the ability to learn, it can affect a child's placement in school. So it's important to do well on tests.

Besides, the ability to do well on tests can help throughout life in such things as getting a driver's license, trying out for sports, or getting a job. Without this ability, a person can be severely handicapped.

Your child can develop this ability. And you can help the child do it. Just try the simple techniques developed through Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) research. This leaflet tells you how.

Why Test?

IT'S helpful for a child to understand why schools give tests. And to know the different kinds of tests.

Tests are a yardstick. Schools use them to measure, and then improve, education. Some tell schools that they need to strengthen courses or change teaching techniques. Other tests compare students by schools, school districts, or cities. All tests determine how well your child is doing. And that's very important.

Most of the tests your child will take are "teacher-made." That is, teachers design them. These tests are associated with the grades on report cards. They help measure a student's progress—telling the teacher and the student whether he or she is keeping up with the class, needs extra help, or, perhaps, is far ahead of other students.

Now and then your child will take "standardized" tests. These use the same standards to measure student performance across the country. Everyone takes the same test according to the same rules. This makes it possible to measure each student's performance against that of others. The group with whom a student's performance is compared is a "norm group" and consists of many students of the same age or grade who took the same test.

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Ask the School

IT could be useful for you to know the school's policies and practices on giving standardized tests and the use of test scores. Ask your child's teacher or guidance counselor about the kinds of tests your child will take during the year—and the schedule for testing.

One other thing: some schools give students practice in taking tests. This helps to make sure that they are familiar with directions and test format. Find out whether your child's school gives "test-taking practice" on a regular basis or will provide such practice if your child needs it.

Avoid Test Anxiety

IT'S good to be concerned about taking a test. It's not good to get "test anxiety." This is excessive worry about doing well on a test and it can mean disaster for a student.

Students who suffer from test anxiety tend to worry about success in school, especially doing well on tests. They worry about the future, and are extremely self-critical. Instead of feeling challenged by the prospect of success, they become afraid of failure. This makes them anxious about tests and their own abilities. Ultimately, they become so worked up that they feel incompetent about the subject matter or the test.

It doesn't help to tell the child to relax, to think about something else, or stop worrying. But there are ways to reduce test anxiety. **Encourage your child to do these things:**

- Space studying over days or weeks. (Real learning occurs through studying that takes place over a period of time.) Understand the information and relate it to what is already known. Review it more than once. (By doing this, the student should feel prepared at exam time.)

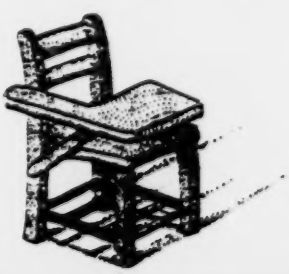
- Don't "cram" the night before—cramming increases anxiety which interferes with clear thinking. Get a good night's sleep. Rest, exercise, and eating well are as important to test-taking as they are to other schoolwork.

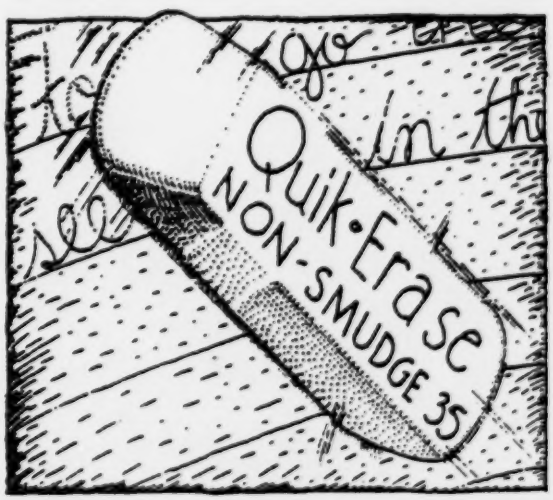
- Read the directions carefully when the teacher hands out the test. If you don't understand them, ask the teacher to explain.

- Look quickly at the entire examination to see what types of questions are included (multiple choice, matching, true/false, essay) and, if possible, the number of points for each. This will help you pace yourself.

- In taking an essay exam, read all the questions first and use the margin for noting phrases that relate to the answers. These phrases will help in writing the essay answer.

- If you don't know the answer to a question, skip it and go on. Don't waste time worrying about it. Mark it so you can identify it as unanswered. If you have time at the end of the exam, return to the unanswered question(s).





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Do's and Don't's

YOU can be a great help to your children if you will observe these do's and don't's about tests and testing:

- Don't be too anxious about a child's test scores. If you put too much emphasis on test scores, this can upset a child.

- Do encourage children. Praise them for the things they do well. If they feel good about themselves, they will do their best. Children who are afraid of failing are more likely to become anxious when taking tests and more likely to make mistakes.

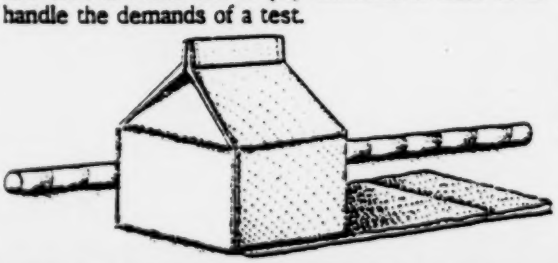
- Don't judge a child on the basis of a single test score. Test scores are not perfect measures of what a child can do. There are many other things that might influence a test score. For example, a child can be affected by the way he or she is feeling, the setting in the classroom, and the attitude of the teacher. Remember, also, that one test is simply one test.

- Meet with your child's teacher as often as possible to discuss his/her progress. Ask the teacher to suggest activities for you and your child to do at home to help prepare for tests and improve your child's understanding of schoolwork. Parents and teachers should work together to benefit students.

- Make sure your child attends school regularly. Remember, tests do reflect children's overall achievement. The more effort and energy a child puts into learning, the more likely he/she will do well on tests.

- Provide a quiet, comfortable place for studying at home.

- Make sure that your child is well rested on school days and especially the day of a test. Children who are tired are less able to pay attention in class or to handle the demands of a test.



- Give your child a well rounded diet. A healthy body leads to a healthy, active mind. Most schools provide free breakfast and lunch for economically disadvantaged students. If you believe your child qualifies, talk to the school principal.

- Provide books and magazines for your youngster to read at home. By reading new materials, a child will learn new words that might appear on a test. Ask your child's school about a suggested outside reading list or get suggestions from the public library.

After the Test

IT'S important for children to review test results. This is especially true when they take teacher-made tests. They can learn from a graded exam paper. It will show where they had difficulty and, perhaps, why. This is especially important for classes where the material builds from one section to the next, as in math. Students who have not mastered the basics of math will be unable to work with fractions, square roots, beginning algebra, and so on.

Discuss the wrong answers with your children and find out why they answered as they did. Sometimes a child misunderstands the way a question is worded or misinterprets what was asked. The child may have known the correct answer but failed to express it effectively.

It's important, too, for children to see how well they used their time on the test and whether guessing was a good idea. This helps them to change what they do on the next test, if necessary.

You and the child should read and discuss all comments written by the teacher. If there are any comments that aren't clear, the child should ask the teacher to explain.

■

OERI's test-taking techniques are helping thousands of children in schools across the country. We hope they will help your child.

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